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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000379

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/2019
TAGS: PREL KISL IR BA
SUBJECT: SECTARIAN COLUMN BRINGS ABOUT ONE-DAY SUSPENSION
OF NEWSPAPER

REF: A. A) MANAMA 220
 1B. B) 08 MANAMA 442
 1C. C) 08 MANAMA 510
 1D. D) MANAMA 49

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: With Shia community leaders preparing to respond in kind to perceived insults published in a Sunni-oriented newspaper, and faced with the prospect of Iranian government complaints, Bahraini authorities intervened, and blocked publication of the paper for one day.
End summary.

12. (SBU) Bahraini authorities invoked the 2002 press and publications law to block publication of the June 22 edition of *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, a pro-government, Sunni-oriented daily. The government has not made clear in public the reasons for its action, but our journalistic contacts are unanimous in pointing to a June 21 column by Sameera Rajab, a women's rights activist and unreconstructed Baathist who has provoked the Shia community before.

13. (SBU) Rajab's June 21 column featured not only criticisms of the Iranian regime (including a claim that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is of Jewish descent), but also references to "corrupt turbanned clerics" and "the final act for the authority of clerics in our societies" which many took as an attack on Shi'ism itself.

14. (C) Shia contacts tell us that Bahraini Shia community leaders had been preparing to fire back with a response to Rajab's article that would have been published in the June 22 edition of *Akhbar al-Khaleej*. The Editor-in-Chief of *Akhbar Al Khaleej*, Anwar Abdulrahman, told PAO that Minister of Culture and Information Sheikha Mai Al-Khalifa phoned him a few minutes after midnight June 22 to inform him that she was blocking publication that day. According to Abdulrahman, the minister said King Hamad was concerned that Rajab's column was reigniting sectarian tensions in Bahrain as well as diplomatic problems with Iran.

15. (U) On June 23, *Akhbar al-Khaleej* again appeared on newsstands. Most other local dailies criticized the suspension, but many Shia expressed satisfaction with what they view as a deserved public rebuke for Rajab and *Akhbar al-Khaleej*.

16. (C) Comment: Sectarian tensions have subsided since the April 11 royal pardon of 178 Shia detainees (ref A), and the Bahraini authorities appear determined to keep things quiet. In recent years King Hamad has intervened in similar situations (refs B, C, and D) to rein in hotheads in both the Sunni and Shia communities. The GOB is probably also eager to avoid a diplomatic spat with Iran that could stoke sectarian feeling here. End comment.

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